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ABSTRACT

Using tape cassettes in evaluating student writing takes less time to cover more comments than does writing comments. It also allows for more personal contact with students and permits a teacher to indicate more adequately how errors can be corrected. One helpful technique is for the teacher to leave the tape recorder on while trying to provide a correction to an awkward sentence, thereby allowing the student to hear the teacher trying various ways of correction before deciding on the most satisfactory one. This gives students a chance to hear how writing is generated and to gain some courage from hearing the teacher's struggle to write. Although it takes time to get used to using a tape cassette, the advantages make it worthwhile. (TJ)

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Play It Again, Sandra: The Use of Tape Cassettes To Evaluate Student Compositions

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Play It Again, Sandra: The Use of Tape Cassettes To Evaluate Student Compositions

Although there are certain general principles pertaining to the crafty art of writing that we can and do teach in the classroom and although there are certain generalizations that we can and do make about the nature of student writing deficiencies, each writer is an individual whose products present unique strengths and weaknesses. Thus the teaching of writing must include evaluation of each student's papers by a critical reader or readers responding to her writing. Some of this process can and should take place in the classroom and in small groups; students need to read each others' papers, to develop their own critical faculties in assessing written discourse, and to discover how effective their writing is in informing and persuading a real live audience. Often students who discount the instructor's response as "English-teacher pickiness" will be convinced of a passage's weakness by a peer's inability to understand it.

But classroom time is limited, and student critics are, at least initially, not very adept; and so finally the effective teaching of writing depends upon frequent and extensive communication between individual student and instructor, the student writing a paper that she submits to the instructor, the instructor evaluating and commenting upon that paper. The student then develops another composition, ideally one that profits from the feedback about the previous writing exercise, and the cycle is repeated. If the student is to benefit from this exchange, the instructor's comments must be clear and complete, must show that student specific ways in which her writing may be improved, and, equally important, must indicate the places and ways in which her writing is effective.

Conventional methods of evaluating compositions--use of some sys-

tem of correction symbols together with written comments--are inefficient. Students are often fuzzy about the meanings of the symbols employed, and even if they do know what a "DM" is, they may not perceive where and how their modifiers have fallen from grace. Further, time pressures often preclude the instructor's writing the detailed comments necessary to clarify these and other matters. In desperation, the teacher of writing may shower the paper with red marks, a deluge leaving the student more confused and discouraged than edified. Moreover, reliance upon traditional correction symbols that identify errors in usage, simple grammar, and punctuation does not really get to the heart of the writing teacher's task: to show the student how to construct clear and effective sentences, paragraphs, and essays.

Many teachers schedule regular conferences during which they deal thoroughly with individual students and their papers. Yet here again the press of time prevents this being a satisfactory solution to the evaluation problem. Few of us can manage even fifteen conferences every single week let alone fifty or sixty. Further, the shy or anxious student may forget much of what has been discussed during the meeting before she is ready to write the next paper.

I have solved many of these problems and have enormously increased my teaching effectiveness by employing tape cassettes to evaluate student papers, their use making it possible for me weekly to give each student detailed feedback about her composition, feedback that includes explanations not just of outright mistakes but also of syntactical, stylistic, and rhetorical weaknesses together with suggestions for remedying these trouble spots. In talking conversationally with the student via tape, I can approach errors and weaknesses not as evidences of original sin but as problems that the student and I are working together to solve. I can also sandwich my discussion of what isn't working between

layers of praise for that which is effective and of encouragement about the progress the student is making.

Because the student can hear me actually reading and responding to her paper, she can gain a more accurate conception of the communication process, getting outside her own frame of reference to follow my thoughts and feelings as I both struggle to understand a poorly written passage and try to figure out ways to remedy or strengthen it or as I react with pleasure to a section of vivid writing. I can also give the student a sense of writing as strategy by discussing with her alternative possibilities for approaching a given passage and the effects of each, and I can show her in terms of her own writing patterns and cognitive development how to generate and work with material to support her premises. The student has a more-or-less permanent record of my responses to her paper. She can play the tape as many times as she needs to hear it, can stop and replay it at any spot where she may have difficulty understanding a particular point, and can record her responses to and questions about my comments.

I realize that there is nothing new or revolutionary about the employing of tape cassettes for evaluating papers, but I have the impression that the technique is still not very widely used in college composition programs, and I suspect that it is not because many instructors do not stay with it long enough to gain facility in the process and so discover its merits. In the beginning, the teacher using taped responses may well find the method awkward, time-consuming, and energy-depleting. Yet I believe that it is well worth this instructor's time to persist until he or she feels comfortable with the technique. Taping one's responses to compositions will never take less time than do traditional methods of evaluation, but neither, once one has mastered the mechanics, will it take any more time.

Now I don't want to suggest that taped evaluations are the magic solution to the problems of teaching writing; no one technique or method is. Further, I suspect that no system of evaluation is effective unless it is governed by an overall theory of teaching composition--and certainly one such theory is implicit in much of what I will be saying here. But used within a sound theoretical framework, taped evaluations are, I am convinced, at least two or three times more effective than are conventional assessments of student compositions.

I have no hard statistical data to support this assertion--only my own impressions and those of my colleagues whom I have persuaded to try using taped evaluations. But I can offer the following observation: the first semester that I used taped responses--and this was three years ago at San Francisco State University--I taught exactly the same course, using identical methods and materials with the same numbers and sorts of students, as I had the previous term. At the end of the semester, I saw an increase in my students' learning, as manifested in their improved writing, of from one hundred to three hundred percent compared to levels achieved by the previous term's class.

The first step in using cassettes with a composition class is to set-up the mechanics of the exchange. In our media-conscious age, many students own their own portable tape-decks, and even if they do not most colleges and universities have language labs and library listening rooms where students can play and record on cassettes. On the course syllabus and booklist that I hand out at the beginning of the semester, I require students to purchase one sixty-minute cassette. The cost of these varies from less than a dollar to around $2.50. The more expensive cassettes have better fidelity and more easily stand a semester's wear and tear than do the cheaper ones, but the inexpensive ones will do. If the student wants to keep a permanent record of all the semester's comments, she will have to buy another tape or two. Otherwise, when I have completely filled one tape, I simply begin again at the beginning and re-record over the old comments. One cassette will accomodate discussion of four to six papers.

I ask each student to purchase a 10" by 12" manila envelope with a clasp, to write her name on the upper right hand corner of that envelope, and to use it to pass papers and tapes back and forth; the cassettes are apt to spill out of folders. I also instruct the student to write her name on the cassette and its case, since tapes do occasionally get separated from their papers, a development resulting in chaos if everything is not clearly labeled. All of this attention to detail may seem like nit-picking, but I have found it to be necessary to ensure the smooth functioning of the process. I do much of my teaching of writing in a course that is designed to work with those students identified as having the most severe writing problems of the college's population. I

have found that in working with such students, whose study habits are often not well organized, it is important that the course's mechanics run as smoothly as possible.

Because I prefer to do my paper work at home, I leave my tape-deck plugged in on my desk where it is readily accessible. When I am ready to evaluate a student's composition, I remove paper and cassette from the envelope and make a mark with a black felt-tip pen at that point on the cassette at which I am going to start recording --usually where the cassette has been stopped after its last playing. Doing a lot of winding and rewinding takes too much of my time, and the notation enables the student to rewind the tape to more or less the spot where my comments start. I also write a note, with the date, on the outside of the student's envelope indicating which side of the cassette she should begin with when listening to the tape. If the student has recorded comments upon or questions about my remarks on a previous paper, she will have written a similarly dated note to that effect on the outside of the envelope.

Next I place the tape on the tape-deck and depress the "play" and "record" buttons; since I use a hand microphone attachment with a remote-control on-off button, the machine will not begin to record until I switch on the microphone. This device, which plugs into a jack on the tape-deck, also enables me easily to switch the machine off if I want to ponder a point, go get a cup of coffee, or simply take a rest.

Once the machine is ready to go, I settle back, switch on the mike, and make some general comments that include greeting the student by name and indicating that I am about to read her paper about Uncle Willie, or whatever. Throughout the evaluation process I try to keep my remarks conversational, and since these sessions are

punctuated by the phone's ringing, my son's wandering in to ask for help with his homework, the cat's leaping onto the desk to attack the papers I'm working on, and so forth, I daresay that the final product has a certain informality of tone. I suspect that this is, however, a plus rather than a minus, for the writing teacher should not be a remote pedagogue declaiming from Olympian heights but a live human being engaged in a working partnership with the student.

When I first started using cassettes to evaluate papers, I regularly gave the student's composition a quick preliminary reading before beginning to comment upon it. I have discovered, however, that it is most effective and most time-conserving for me simply to respond to the paper as I read it through. Thus the student gets the benefit of my initial impressions and can judge the degree of success with which she has clearly and persuasively led me through her subject-matter. Writing is largely strategy, and it is important for the student to hear at what point she may be losing or confusing me, her reader.

At the beginning of the semester, I will have handed out to the class a dittoed sheet listing my revision symbols and their meanings, symbols and their explanations both couched in the simplest terminology possible. I do not believe in overmarking a student's paper since I feel that getting a composition back covered with red marks like an accident victim bleeding to death--or even with black marks like one that has just been badly bruised--is more demoralizing than helpful; for this reason I use a plain lead pencil to mark papers, and I make as few marks as possible on the student's manuscript--a practice that the taped commentary makes feasible. However, as I read through the paper I do try to indicate with a notation those grammatical or rhetorical problems I'm discussing so that as

I refer to them on the tape, the student will see the precise spot I am talking about. If I am dealing with an error, I put the mark as close to the mistake as possible--usually right above it so that the student can see exactly which word, phrase, or sentence I am referring to. For example, if the student has used a faulty adjective clause construction, I mark "X adj.cl." above the adjective clause signal (or relative pronoun) that governs the clause. But of course I will also explain to the student how and why the clause is faulty and how the error can be corrected. If I feel that the student does not understand the general grammatical point involved, I take some time to try to clarify it for her.

I keep up a running commentary upon the paper as I read it, trying especially to applaud those places in which the student has performed her writing task well. My strategy varies, of course, from writer to writer; a student who is doing well in the course and who clearly understands its material can be given a more sophisticated critique and pointed in more ambitious directions than can one who is still struggling to master basic sentence patterns. Indeed, one of the advantages of using cassettes is that they enable the instructor to deal with each student individually, at the level at which she is capable of working. But in any event, I try in each evaluation session to establish priorities and to comment accordingly. Students are confused by having too many things thrown at them at once, and so in suggesting revisions and corrections,I discuss only those matters most urgently requiring attention. It seems to me futile to point out a student's failure to use the subjunctive voice or her misplaced commas if she is still unable correctly to predicate a sentence. Besides, I find that once a student has mastered basic sentence structure, these smaller points often fall into

place almost automatically. In writing as in living, first things should be first.

Further, because I approach the teaching of writing sequentially and developmentally in evaluating a paper, I comment only upon those areas that we have already covered in class. If it is the third week of the semester, we will not yet have studied the joining of sentences, and so I steadfastly ignore comma splices, concentrating instead upon the student's performance of the week's writing tasks--for instance, the use of concrete, vivid nouns and adjectives and strong active verbs and the employing of adjective clauses to combine sentences. Because the week's assignment will have asked the student to use these devices in her paper, she will probably have at least attempted to do so, and I thus am able to praise her for what she has accomplished as well as to point out what she still needs to do. And positive reinforcement is always more effective in stimulating learning than is negative. Throughout the semester, I also make it a point in my comments to return over and over to material covered during the earlier weeks; beginning writers need lots of practice and reinforcement for practice in these basic skills. For instance, during week six of the semester I might say on an evaluation, "Hey, that's great--you're remembering to use strong, active verbs and concrete and personal subjects; I think you've really mastered that point"--even though we had first considered these matters during weeks two and three.

In moving through the paper, I deal with it paragraph by paragraph, paying attention first to the effectiveness of the topic sentence. If it is good, vivid, well-structured, I say so; if it is weak or poorly predicated, I point this out and suggest alternative ways of structuring a sentence that will do the job the student wants done. If as I work my way through the body of the paragraph, I dis-

cover that the topic sentence does not adequately summarize all the paragraph's points, I return to it, suggesting to the student that she needs to rephrase it so that it will act as an umbrella covering the entire paragraph. I specify for her just what general points and emphases that sentence needs to include and how she might revise it to do so. As I deal with the paragraph's supporting sentences, I look not only at their structure but also at the logic of their organization. If the student moves from sentence to sentence according to some clear principle, I commend her for this organization. On the other hand, if she jumps randomly from point to point or begins a point, abandons it, and then comes back to it later, I suggest ways of redesigning the paragraph to place together those sentences that deal with similar ideas or to move from point to point in a more rational order--for instance, from past to present, from general to specific, from least to most important. Of course, I repeat this process in terms of paragraph relationships.

Since I spend much of the semester discussing sentence construction, techniques of joining, subordinating, combining, developing sentences, and so on, I pay a lot of attention to the relationships between sentences. If a student writes a series of paratactic statements, I let her hear me struggling to divine the logical connections between them. In suggesting ways in which those sentences can be joined together to make one fluid statement whose relationships are clear, I let the student hear me consider alternative possibilities, each depending upon her intentions for the passage. For example, a student writes, "I was depressed. I did not know what I wanted to do with my life. I sat in my room for hours at a time, listening to records and doing nothing." In my comments, I tell her that I'm not sure whether she was depressed because she did not know what she wanted

to do with her life or whether she did not know what to do with her life because she was depressed and suggest that she should join her sentences in a way that will show me their cause and effect relationship. *I further ask her to consider* which of these two ideas she wants to emphasize: her depression or her indecision, or whether she perhaps wants equally to stress both. In the latter case, she should join the sentences with a coordinating rather than a subordinating conjunction: "I was depressed, for I did not know what I wanted to do with my life." In asking her to reflect upon such questions of emphasis, I will consider with her the entire paragraph's focus, for this should dictate which idea is most important to the topic and so should be emphasized. I further suggest to her that her sitting in her room for hours is probably a consequence of either her depression or her indecision and that she should join these ideas in a way that will show that relationship: "Because I did not know what I wanted to do with my life, I was depressed, and so I sat in my room for hours . . . " Or, alternatively, "Because I was depressed, I did not know what I wanted to do with my life, and so I sat . . . "

In doing this kind of evaluation, I am not only teaching the student about subordination but also encouraging her to think about rhetorical strategy.

I should add that in making these comments, I do not use terms like "coordinating conjunction," "reduction," "subordinating conjunction," and so on. Rather, I talk about using a "connector" or making a sentence into an adverb clause or a verbal phrase and joining it to another sentence. Since we have already covered these syntactical units in class, the student should know what I mean, and I am always careful to phrase for her any new version I suggest. In the same way, I alsc pay attention to the student's use of transitional phrases, or lack of them,

I also look at her diction. Beginning writers tend to repeat the same words over and over, and frequently I suggest alternative word choices or ways of using pronouns as substitutes for the same overworked noun. Or I may suggest ways in which the writer could make her language more vivid, say by choosing a verb that conveys action in place of a more general one: "walked," "skipped," "ran," or "stumbled" instead of the contentless "went." I also read the passage aloud so that the student can hear the effect of all this repetition; reading aloud can also heighten the student's awareness of short, choppy sentences, awkward and convoluted constructions, and so on.

I do not feel that I must shut off the mike until I have come up with the perfect solution to a student's particular writing problem, for I think that it benefits her to hear me struggling with the dilemma, trying several ways of dealing with it, and finally finding some effective ones. Thus I am working with, rather than on, the student to solve a common problem, and I try always in my comments to stress that the final choice will depend upon her intentions for the piece of writing. Most beginning writers do not realize that they have options available to them, that they are able to control the ways in which their papers work. It is here, of course, that using taped comments can be such an effective tool in teaching writing, for one can take the time and go into the detail necessary to show the student these possibilities and discuss them with her.

Taped comments are also invaluable in dealing with syntactical difficulties, for example with weak or faulty predication, one of the most vexing problems that we must contend with in student writing since often what's wrong with these incoherent sentences doesn't fall into any clear grammatical category. Even if

one marks such a sentence as being faultily predicated, showing the student both why this is so and what she can do about it requires time and detailed comment--again, a possibility for the instructor using taped responses to student papers. In the same way, one can quickly and clearly explain to the student why a pronoun reference is faulty, why a subject fails to agree with its verb--explanations that traditional evaluation methods which simply identify the error do not permit.

Using taped comments, one can also show students how to strengthen the rhetorical effectiveness of their writing. Typically, novice writers have difficulty moving back and forth between general and specific, often writing in generalities that are unsupported by any persuasive detail. Now certainly in using written notations, one can indicate the places at which a student needs to support her assertions with examples or details, but I have found that beginning writers often don't know how to go about this or what might constitute "supporting material." Even though we spend a lot of class time talking about the use of illustration and detail, students often can't see how to apply these principles to their own work.

For instance, a student writes, "Last summer I worked as a playground director. It was really interesting. I liked working with the kids. I hope I can do this job again some day." In commenting upon this passage, I can suggest to her that we need to know what the conditions of the job were: where was the playground located? What ages of children attended the program there? What were their backgrounds? What did she have to do as a playground director? Organize games for the kids? Direct these games? Did she plan a craft program, and if so, did she have to set up materials, show the children how to use them? Did she have to spend lots of time dealing with disciplinary problems and keeping the peace? And so on and so on.

Why did she enjoy working with the children? Because she felt that she was doing something worthwhile, and if so, what and why? Can she give us some specific incidents illustrating this point? For instance, "At the beginning of the summer, nine-year old Johnnie was shy and withdrawn, sitting by himself all day at the edge of the playground and refusing to participate in any of the activities. I started going over to him several times a day, talking with him, asking him to help me with setting up the clay and tools for the pottery table . . . " and so on--you all know how such an illustration would go. The point is, that in taping comments upon a paper one can run through several of these hypothetical examples, showing the student the kind of material she needs to develop and the degree of development it needs in order to be persuasive. Of course, in going through this process with a student, one is also teaching her how to generate her material, and one can work the same way to help the student discover the general assertions that will sum up a list of discrete particulars.

One can also talk with the student about a paper's balance. Beginning writers often start off a paper with a bang and end with a whimper, writing an effective and well developed paragraph or two and then, at precisely the point at which they need to do the most work, lapsing into a few general statements and simply stopping. To return to the example of the playground director's job, I might suggest to a student that if the main point of her paper is going to be the satisfaction that she derived from working with children, she should not spend half the paper filling us in on the details of when and where she worked, what her duties were, and so on, but rather get this information out very quickly and devote the body of the paper to discussing her relationships with the children and the changes that she saw taking place in particular children as a result of her efforts.

What all this boils down to is that in evaluating a paper, we

should not just point out its weaknesses but also show the student what to do about them. Certainly one can and should cover all these matters in the classroom, but the student finally must learn to recognize and apply the general principles in terms of her own writing patterns, and in taping comments, the instructor can analyze and discuss the individual student's particular writing habits and suggest specific ways of strengthening them.

When I have gone through the paper in this detailed way--and I should again stress the fact that I would not discuss all these matters in any one essay but only those that seemed to me most important for the student's progress--I shut off the hand-microphone and give the composition a quick rereading to make sure that I have not lost sight of the forest for the trees--or perhaps I should say, the paper for its phrases. I then turn the mike back on and summarize for the student the theme's overall strengths and weaknesses, discussing the weaknesses first and ending with the strengths. Positive reinforcement again.

I also indicate whether or not the paper represents progress in the student's building of her writing skills. If it does not demonstrate improvement, I look over her planning sheet and rought drafts (which I require her to hand in with the finished product) and make recommendations about how she might work more effectively at the planning, composing, or revising stages of the writing process. I try to be very specific: for instance, I might indicate to her that she failed to generate sufficient material during the pre-writing process and suggest that she needs to spend more time and effort at that stage of the writing activity. Or I might point out that her rough draft shows signs of inadequate reworking, of insufficient questioning or shaping of her material, and then pinpoint those areas that clearly need more attention during the composing or editing processes. Beginning

writers are extremely reluctant to revise their work, and one must coerce them considerably to do so. However, by the end of the semester many of the students in the basic writing skills class put their papers through three, four, or even more drafts--and of course part of what they are learning through listening to me evaluate their papers is precisely how to approach the composing and revising tasks.

Finally, I either give the student a pep talk about making a greater effort on the next paper or offer her a verbal pat on the back for a job well done and urge her to keep up the good work. I then stop the recording process, remove the cassette from the tape-deck, and return it, together with the papers, to the student's envelope.

At the most, I have spent fifteen minutes on the paper, and to discuss it at greater length would probably be to bog down in too many details. In the beginning, it took me longer to deal with papers, but practice really does reduce both the time and the effort involved in taping evaluations. I have been using taped comments for over three years now, with weekly workloads ranging from fifteen to seventy papers, and I can attest that the results are well worth the time required to learn the process. If nothing else, the weekly personal communication between the student and me generates in the student a much greater interest and involvement in the course than comes from the exchange of written comments. David Carson and others working with the use of cassettes to evaluate papers have collected data showing that students overwhelmingly prefer taped to written evaluations.[1] My own experience strongly supports these findings: on anonymous questionnaires, both my own students and those of my colleagues using taped responses unanimously report that they much prefer taped communications to written evaluations. In fact, after a few weeks

in the course, students will often run from the classroom, their returned tapes and papers in hand, to the nearest tape-deck in order to hear the evaluation. And when students become this excited about the writing process, we can really begin to teach them to write.

Notes

[1] See David L. Carson and John B. Mc Tasney, "Grading Technical Reports with the Cassette Tape Recorder: The Results of a Test Program at the United States Air Force Academy," J. Tech. Writing & Commun., 3(2), pp. 131-144; Charles R. Stratton, "The Electric Report Card: A Follow-up on Cassette Grading," J. Tech. Writing & Commun., 5 (1), pp. 17-22.